

## Monsieur Marcel and Monsieur Flop:

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**Monsieur Marcel and Monsieur Flop:  
Failure in clown training at Ecole Philippe Gaulier**

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The École Philippe Gaulier is a private school for performers, with an international reputation for teaching clown. Gaulier offers a formal training process that emphasises the need for on-going reflective practice.

In this classroom students begin to generate clown material, while learning the skills of interaction required to make audiences laugh. In this article I will explore a pedagogical device used in Gaulier's classroom and writing; two friends of clowns named 'Monsieur Flop' and 'Monsieur Marcel'. M. Marcel is (mistakenly) regarded as an expert performer, who gives out what Gaulier refers to as 'stupid ideas'. M. Flop is an accident magnet, and his appearance signifies that things are not going well. The invocation of these two friends of clowns creates a sense of playful, complicit distance which encapsulates Gaulier's ambiguous relationship with sincerity.

These characters provide a framework for discussing the different registers of 'failure' in clown performance. The students are taught to listen to M. Flop and M. Marcel, and thus to work independently from the teacher. Through the stories told about these figures, I will examine the interaction of play, stupidity, and failure in Gaulier's clown classroom.

**Keywords:** Gaulier, clown, failure, flop, laughter

Failure is part of the dramaturgy of clown performance; it is seen in failure to complete tasks, failure to convincingly represent life, misunderstandings and clumsiness. In a slightly different sense, failure is also recognised as a dominant experience in Philippe Gaulier's clown training, evident in the moments where the audience does not laugh, and where the charismatic and entertainingly brusque teacher tells the student how 'horrible' they were. An engagement with failure places Gaulier in the contemporary theatre moment.

In this article I will examine the methods by which Gaulier's clown students learn to generate clown material, and develop performance skills of projecting personality and responding to the audience. I will suggest that the use of ambiguous characters create playful distance around the learning of these skills, contributing to the ambivalent territory of the clown as lovable idiot, prone to funny failures. Gaulier's system is formal teaching for heuristic learning, and begins a process of auto-didacticism, whereby the students continue to develop and shape their learning in their on-going performance practice.

I studied with Gaulier on short courses *Le Jeu* (2008), *Clown* (2009) and two week-long tasters in *Bouffon* (2012 and 2016). Like many who have studied with Gaulier, I have a collection of (more or less) funny anecdotes about my failures at the school. While studying with Gaulier, several of my classmates and I struggled to separate the dramaturgical failures that led to successful clowning from the performance failures that led to the teacher's infamous rebukes. This elusive aspect of Gaulier's approach can be clarified with an analysis of his references to two 'friends of clowns', Monsieur Marcel and Monsieur Flop.

Purcell Gates, writing in this journal, succinctly defines the paradoxes and ambiguities surrounding failure in Gaulier's classroom:

Gaulier frequently referred to ‘Monsieur Flop’ during the clown workshop as the clown’s best friend [...] The flop is the mistake. In a clown performance before an audience, it is a rehearsed mistake; in the clown classroom, it is genuine - the student truly messes up and faces a moment (often unbearable) of not knowing what to do next. (2011b, p. 236)

I will further unpack these ideas to analyse the ways clown students can learn the craft of the flop. Initially it is necessary to separate the different ways failure is experienced at Gaulier’s school. Failure in the clown classroom can be grouped into broad categories:

1. The scripted failure, or joke premise for a clown number. Gaulier’s teacher Jacques Lecoq gives a simple example that could be the premise of a sketch: the clown ‘fails to balance on a stool’ (2002, p. 160).

2. The failure to achieve the intention of performance: the clown goes on stage and does something she thinks will be funny, but nobody laughs. This can be referred to as ‘the flop’. Flops can be the result of bad ideas, overthinking, or overcomplicating. More prosaically, flops can be caused by problems with performance skill, identified with Gaulier’s famous put-downs; A performer speaks too quietly ‘like a primary school teacher’, fidgets ‘like a penguin who can’t decide which testicle is hurting him’, doesn’t include the audience, ignores her friend on stage, or forgets the game.

3. The flop that is recognized by the clown and reincorporated into the act. If the clown can respond to silence, showing the audience that she knows that nobody is laughing, often, the audience will laugh.

There is slippage between the three, each can appear to be the other, which will be explored later in the article. However, the first and second varieties of failure are

separated by Gaulier in his writing and teaching into the concerns of M. Marcel and M. Flop, respectively. These personified clown practices are found throughout Gaulier's writing and used in the classroom on a daily basis. M. Marcel is a revered figure, who holds court in a post-office café in Paris, and whom performers approach for ideas for their clown shows, despite the fact his

reputation as a master of shows is related to the fact that one of his acquaintances has a cousin who knows someone whose uncle is the impresario at the Watermill Supper Room.<sup>1</sup>

[...]

The idea of a 'clown' routine is transmitted by a nitwit to a numbskull. The numbskull will try to make a number out of it' (Gaulier 2007: 280).

<sup>1</sup> Gaulier does not reference the 'Watermill Supper Room'.

M. Marcel has no expertise, but is trusted ardently. In the summer clown course 2009, late one long, hot, afternoon, Gaulier told a version of the story introducing M. Marcel. An enthusiastic student, with a notebook and pen poised, asked Gaulier for the address of M. Marcel's Post Office Café, so he could seek advice for clown scenes. Gaulier's face gleamed with amusement as he playfully explained the need for secrecy and discretion for the revered 'master of shows'. Many students laughed, complicit in the deception that M. Marcel actually exists somewhere, while others frowned, puzzled at the teacher's secrecy.

M. Flop is ambiguous in a different way. When a clown student is not making the audience laugh - when she 'flops' - Gaulier will exclaim that M. Flop has arrived. It is more explicit that M. Flop is a symbolic characterisation of an experience, rather than a person arriving on stage. However the treatment surrounding M. Flop's 'arrival' can suggest that he is both a threat and a friend to the performer, meaning students must discover for themselves whether they want to avoid or embrace this character's appearance. By introducing the experiences of stupid ideas and failure to amuse the

audience through these figures Gaulier offers the clown student and performer a playful distance from failure.

### **Stupid ideas**

Introducing clown exercises, Gaulier frequently informs the student she has been to see M. Marcel, and been given a piece of ridiculous advice. In a clear example in *The Tormentor*, a hypothetical student wishes to convince an audience he is an electrician:

“What should I do, Monsieur Marcel?” “Kid,” he replies, “an electrician always goes around with a screwdriver which lights or doesn’t light up inside a transparent casing. Sometimes the electrician says, “There’s juice”; other times “There’s no juice”. “Stop, Monsieur Marcel, I’ve understood”. You haven’t bought the screwdriver. You’ve thought a little bit of wood will do the trick. Show the pleasure of the imbecile who wants to make believe that he is an exceptional electrician (Gaulier 2007: 300).

In this exercise, M. Marcel has supplied the clown student with a failure to understand social reality. In *Comedy Studies*, Peter Marteinson identifies epistemological failure as a root origin of comedy and of laughter, suggesting that comic moments have a basis in a person who misunderstands: ‘does the object of our laughter appear to not to know something that we hold as evidently true?’ (Marteinson 2010: 175). Gaulier refers to this rehearsed, or scripted mistake as a ‘stupid idea’. Though an electrician might say ‘there’s juice’ when using a light-up screwdriver, the advice given to the clown student is to present this obscure social signifier as though it will convince the audience that ‘he is an exceptional electrician’. Gaulier offers a range of variations on signifiers, all based on plausible but incomplete signifiers associated with jobs:

Monsieur Marcel has said that a doctor would always say ‘Take your clothes off’... a plumber would say ‘the plumber you had before wasn’t much good’, a school teacher

‘take out your dictation notebooks’, a butcher ‘my meat is even more tender than my wife’, a policeman ‘show me your documents’ and a director of the Bank of France would get a lot of faxes (2007: 301).

These fictional misunderstandings, if not actually the ‘rehearsed’ mistakes described by Purcell Gates, are scripted failures to understand reality. The situations are crafted by Gaulier and performed by the students deliberately with the intention of making people laugh. Gaulier provides the misunderstanding, and the students find a way to perform this ‘stupid idea’ with which they have been supplied. By framing clown exercises as ideas for clown scenes offered by M. Marcel and faithfully recreated by the clown, Gaulier plays with apparent failures of knowledge. It is significant that Gaulier doesn’t provide these stupid ideas directly, but distances them from his own status as master clown teacher, which reduces their importance and does not establish them as clown canon. M. Marcel’s ideas do not limit the potential repertoire of clowns but rather open the possibilities, whatever stupid idea you get from a ‘nitwit’ you trust is a good way of generating clown material, and two ‘numbskulls’ can perform the same material but show their own personal relationship to the material and the moment of performance. Gaulier puts this in terms of failure and the individual performer: ‘The audience laughs more at the absurdity and humanity of the numbskull, more than it laughs at the gag’ (Gaulier 2007: 280).

### **If there’s a disaster**

While M. Marcel gives out ideas for shows, M. Flop works for him, responsible for ‘after-sales service’ (Gaulier 2007: 286). M. Flop is constantly involved in physical and serious accidents with traffic, banana skins, and things landing on his head, and his proximity to danger and love of speed qualify him for the role as Marcel’s assistant. M. Marcel requests that he support performers; ‘Every time a show hits trouble, you jump in your car, go to the theatre and warn the performers to do something fast’ (Gaulier



2007: 286). M. Flop is in tune with danger, and so appears with ‘trouble’ – for a clown performer in Gaulier’s school this means when the audience is not amused. The performers, sensing the arrival of M. Flop, are instructed to ‘do something fast’, to change what they are doing for the pleasure of the audience, or to leave the stage. It is for this reason that Gaulier suggests that students should be thankful for the appearance of the flop, and that this character is described as the friend of clowns, as has been noted by Purcell Gates, Louise Peacock (2009) and Jon Davison (2013). However Gaulier recognises that not all performers understand this act of friendship, ‘M. Marcel says to M. Flop, “Sensitive actors will love you and thank you. Idiots will call you a bird of misfortune”’ (Gaulier 2007: 286). Performers might wish to avoid the appearance of this friend, but sensitivity to the flop is a clown skill that is emphasised at the school. The process of learning to welcome M. Flop is elusive for many students, and an on-going process for clown performers. The multiple opportunities for meeting this moment at the school allow for a wide range of possibilities to be experienced and watched.

### **Learning to sell your stupidity**

M. Marcel and M. Flop are invoked in everyday clown exercises. The advice from M. Marcel is given in a baffling and funny way, but Gaulier demands that the exercises are performed ‘following Monsieur Marcel’s examples to the letter’. In the following scenario, Gaulier sets out a conversation between himself and a student who has been asked to enact one of M. Marcel’s stupid ideas about social signifiers. This relatively concise written example chimes with many similar occasions I witnessed in the classroom in Sceaux:

A fanatic gets up. He runs.

“Your name?”

“Gregor”

“Where do you come from?”

“England”

“Are you ready, Gregor?”

“Yes Sir.”

“I have the feeling you might be too ready, Gregor.” (Gregor doesn’t understand, everyone laughs.)

“I’m sorry, sir?”

“I meant, Gregor, that, in your head, you have already done this exercise so well that you will serve it up cold to the audience and meet Monsieur Flop.” (Gregor doesn’t understand, everyone laughs).

“Gregor, did you hear people laughing when you didn’t understand?”

“Sorry, sir?”

“Gregor, why do you think your classmates laugh when you simply don’t get it?”

“I don’t know, sir” (Everyone laughs).

“I’m going to tell you why, Gregor. They’re laughing because when you don’t understand, your face is full of comic foolishness”.

“I didn’t know, sir”. (Everyone laughs).

Gregor does the exercise. A catastrophe. He gets angry and even more angry. No one likes him. I stop him. I ask the class who liked Gregor. No one answers. I tell Gregor no one liked him. I ask him if he knows why.

“No”, he says. (Everyone laughs.)

I ask the class if they like Gregor when he doesn’t understand. Everyone says they love him. I tell Gregor that when he doesn’t understand, people laugh at his vulnerability and his foolishness and that his clown must be found somewhere around there.

“Ah, good”, says Gregor. (Everyone laughs)

Gregor doesn’t understand anything. Will he be able to sell his stupidity? (Gaulier 2007: 301 - 302).

The exercise began as an attempt to follow M. Marcel’s stupid ideas. However, Gaulier identified a potential flop before the scene began - Gregor’s overthinking and

overconfidence. He points out the danger that Gregor will ‘meet Monsieur Flop’. This warning causes Gregor to react, in this case to be confused, and the audience enjoys this reaction to the flop, which Gaulier explicitly points out, three times. After the audience laugh the first time, the teacher gives the student another opportunity to react the same way and gain a laugh, but he doesn’t understand. Gregor’s face ‘full of comic foolishness’ is an authentic reaction, not feigned for the purpose of provoking laughter, but it gets that result, so he is both provoked and instructed to show this face more often. Gregor is then given the opportunity to play M. Marcel’s stupid idea, which is a flop. The audience ‘don’t like him’ when he reacts angrily. The anger at the flop is also an authentic reaction, but this does not get a laugh, so it is not useful. Gaulier depicts himself offering Gregor reminders, in the form of further provocation and explanation, about which reaction to flop the audience did enjoy. The audience laughs a total of six times in this excerpt, and always at Gregor’s reaction to Gaulier’s difficult questions. Despite Gregor’s optimism, and his anger during the failing exercise, it is his incomprehension which gets the biggest laugh. The final two laughs provide a clue to the process of learning to play with the flop in order to project personality. Gregor’s classmates ‘love him’ when he looks clueless, but not when he is angry: the former is where Gregor can ‘find’ his clown. We can imagine Gregor’s visible incomprehension contrasting with his desire to be a good student with his final ‘Ah, Good’.

Davison argues that although clown students experience real flop in the classroom, fops in clown performance can be, and often are, acted. By paying attention to what aspects of their own failures get laughs, clown students can learn to perform these deliberately, and thus regain agency. Davison’s theory would suggest that if Gregor pays attention to these laughs, next time he enters the stage, he could choose not to attempt the exercise, but instead show the audience that he doesn’t understand. The shift where Gregor could ‘sell his stupidity’ might be understood as taking a flop and

turning it into a stupid idea. The audience might laugh at the same expression on Gregor's face, and it would not matter to them whether he really did understand or not. Purcell Gates describes such a strategy as 'tricky' because of Gaulier's inconsistent feedback: 'A student could perform an action during an exercise that would be met with 'Ah, beautiful', only to be told she was 'Horrible' the next time she performed the same action' (2011b, p. 237). However, the action (Gregor's foolish face, in this example) could certainly be repeated, and praised within the pedagogy, if supported by other performance qualities, being responsive and sensitive to the audience and other performers on stage, rhythms, music, and whatever is happening in the moment of performance. In Marteinson's words, for a clown to 'appear not to know', the mistake does not have to be authentic, but can be performed and still make audiences laugh. Gregor could perform the same expression without having to first meet M. Flop, or he could perform the expression after a different flop, if it is sensitively performed, in response to an appropriate moment of performance.

In my own experience of the classroom, the lesson to revisit and use genuine flops as deliberate clown strategy is not usually this explicit, but is visible in the teacher's provocations and repetitions. Gregor is encouraged to revisit and use his stupidity as deliberate clown strategy. However, it is not unreasonable to imagine Gregor going home that day disappointed at his own learning - he failed at the exercise, was told that 'no one likes him', and did not understand the teacher's advice. The amusing reaction to a flop is not always incomprehension, and Gaulier seeks to identify, provoke and extend whatever the student does that is funniest to their classmates. During the summer course of 2009, students were funny when angry, laughing, proud of themselves, sheepish, or when their costumes caused problems. Gaulier pushed these students into repeated situations where they showed elements of their personality they would perhaps avoid revealing in everyday life, but where they were funny. These are

understood as types of ‘stupidity’ and can appear to the audience (and to many performers) as being unique personality traits, craftable into clown personae. For many students this is an uncomfortable discovery process. However, by attempting stupid and difficult things in front of an audience of peers, clown students can find ‘their stupidity’ which they can sell, or their persona they can share with audiences in the hope of making them laugh.

### **Repeating and returning to flops**

Toward the end of the clown courses, Gaulier’s students play a game called ‘Emergency Clown Hospital’. Gaulier describes the game:

for students who haven’t made anyone laugh during their work. The student explains the problems of their clown and the many flops it’s endured. Every time, there are roars of laughter from all sides (2007, p. 308).

Purcell Gates examines this game, describing one self-identified ‘bad student’, who performed this exercise successfully, ‘At moments during her recounting scattered laughter broke out in the room, usually during her transition from describing her efforts into stating that they had failed’ (2011b: 238). What had been a failure to make people laugh became funny in its re-telling, or re-performance. In this moment, paying attention to the flop seems to be used as an exercise in humility and a provider of comic material, and a way of identifying elements of clown personae. Peacock cites Gaulier’s website, where he identifies the value of the deliberate flop, ‘It is funny that playing with Mr Flop happens at the end after many, many other flops that weren’t at all deliberate, that weren’t playmates then’ ([www.ecolephilippegaulier.com](http://www.ecolephilippegaulier.com), 2005, cited 2009, p. 37). This hints at the effect of the repetitive nature of flops, and the need for the student to respond to them with pleasure. Purcell Gates sees the on-going

experience of failure to be promoted by Gaulier's workshop structure as a deliberate strategy toward learning clown:

The dominant code in Gaulier's classroom was the distinction between success and failure, in which Gaulier deliberately structured exercises in the Clown workshop to promote failure, causing students to directly experience the perpetually-failing state of clown (Purcell Gates 2011a, p. 189).

This observation is a useful one, showing that Gaulier facilitates moments where flops are likely, but I feel that understanding clowns to be in a 'perpetually-failing state' is too simple. As Purcell Gates recognises, there are different levels on which a clown student can fail. Davison also breaks down the possibilities of success and failure for a clown appearing on stage. The clown, he says, enters and does something. If the audience laugh it is success, if they don't, it is failure. In the case of the latter:

...if I accept it, and the audience sees that I have accepted it, they will most probably laugh. In that case, I am in the same position as if my original action had made them laugh and I can continue or repeat my action in the full knowledge that my audience is with me. In other words I have converted my failure into a success (Davison 2013: 198).

This system of failure and success - or the flop which gets a laugh - takes place on stage, but also occurs throughout Gaulier's courses, and students encounter all three situations - the audience laughing immediately, the audience not laughing at all, and the conversion of this quiet into a laugh through acknowledgement by the clown. Conversion of quiet to laughter can happen in more ways than indicated by Davison, but not all the ways involve the agency of the clown performer as he describes. Many beginner students have an experience like that of Gregor, where it is the teacher who points out the flop, and it is his intervention that changes the quiet to laughter. With or without the

teacher's assistance, a recognised flop can have the effect of making an audience laugh. A clown who perpetually flopped while attempting acts, who carefully and playfully responded to minor failures, and turned them into occasions for an audience to laugh, could be described as 'perpetually-flopping', a more useful description of Gaulier's clown approach. On the other hand, a professional clown who perpetually failed in their intention to make an audience laugh would eventually stop selling tickets. Similarly, an experience of perpetually failing in a clown classroom would be less valuable, and less enjoyable, than that of perpetually flopping.

Gaulier positions his own successful clown act with Pierre Byland, *Les Assiettes*, as originating with the advice of M. Marcel to 'break a plate', however he writes that in performance, they were surprised by the outcome:

When my friend and I smashed a plate, the audience didn't laugh. We didn't understand why they didn't laugh [...]. This made them laugh uproariously . 'The audience's timing's all wrong', we thought. So we broke another plate, so they could get their timing right. Another failure. More laughter at the wrong time (Gaulier 2007: 280).

In the scene described, the stupid idea of plate-smashing was a flop. However, the performers transformed it into something that made the audience laugh. Interestingly, Gaulier maintains his stance of incomprehension at his own initial failure by suggesting that it was the audience who failed to laugh, and got their timing 'wrong'. In Gaulier's view, the performer does not fail. Instead, he helps the audience with their own failures. There is also a performative tone in the text that replicates the premise of the show, meaning that the reader can laugh at the same incomprehension in the retelling. In the retelling, the not-understanding becomes clown material and is funny to read as well as being a score for performance.

Responses to flops can lead to very funny and surprising moments of clown performance. Mistakes experienced as flops can also become stupid ideas, which are the basis of a reliable performance. However the role of the authentic flop, unplanned and experienced in front of an audience and acknowledged ‘in the moment’ has a different place in the clown performance to which Gaulier’s students are aspiring. In 1992, Compagnie Philippe Gaulier presented *The End of the Tunnel* at the Edinburgh Fringe and on a tour of the UK. The company was made up of Gaulier alumni Cal McCrystal, Mick Barnfather, Toby Sedgwick, Anders Ohrn and Abigail Dulay. McCrystal remembers the show being received very differently between one night and the next:

[O]n a good night, it was the funniest thing that anyone had ever seen. And nobody could believe that we could ever have a bad night, ‘cause it was, we were all so hilarious... But on a bad night ... people would leave the theatre, and they’d deliberately slam their seats up and they’d stomp out... it made people absolutely furious (McCrystal 2013).

McCrystal compares his experience to that of a stand up comedian, ‘dying in the clubs’ as a rite of passage into becoming successful. However, it would seem that the repeated flops at the school are designed to provide this experience, where students can learn what audiences laugh at, and otherwise. *The End of the Tunnel* was a high-profile debut show for the company, which had come from the highly-regarded London school which had made Gaulier well known in the UK. Though McCrystal looks back on it as a learning opportunity, this is unlikely to have been Gaulier’s aim in staging the show. The story emphasises the fluidity and relativity of the flop at the scale of a whole show. *The End of the Tunnel* received different responses from one show to the other, though presumably it was based on predominantly the same material, characters and ideas. With hindsight, McCrystal describes the process of making the show as a prominent reason for the show’s variability:



Philippe conducted the rehearsals very much like [...] he conducts his workshops. [...] The ideas went on and on and on and we weren't really fixing anything, we never really repeated anything. Rehearsals [...] were enormous fun, whenever we were just free and we were playing, and I think Philippe thought, "this show's going to be so funny, these people are so funny". But whenever we came to repeat any of the things that we'd had success with in rehearsal, it always fell flat. (McCrystal 2013).

McCrystal describes the failure to be reliably funny as a learning experience, and although he holds Gaulier in the highest regard, and maintains that the show was excellent 'on a good night', in his directing career he has used a different rehearsal strategy to that used on *The End of the Tunnel*. Here the show's flopping could be described as generative, because it provoked a new strategy for McCrystal to work as a clown director in a way that did not allow such potential for failure. McCrystal's strategy attempts to eliminate failure by removing the improvisation, but still makes maximum use of the repeatable flop as a dramaturgical tool. McCrystal has directed several shows for Spymonkey, and performers Aitor Basauri and Toby Park identify the director's skill in helping them to find repeatable comic actions, a part of their clown practice which they have developed since leaving the school. Basauri suggests that the use of flop in the clown course provides a base on which to build clown material, but that Gaulier does not include lessons on how to create a clown act:

the school, is an amazing journey to know the flop. Which is where the clown lives. If there is no flop, there is no clown, in my opinion... And the thing that is never told [at the school], or at least I don't remember anyone telling: now, you save the flop, and create something very funny. That is guaranteed, funny (Basauri 2013).

Park also emphasised that this skill of McCrystal's is not the same as the initial discovery that Gaulier helps people with. The 'journey to know the flop' is an

exploratory one, where students might not always find the correct balance between success and failure, but get to know how they might make funny material using flops. Basauri's observation fits the description of the clown as 'perpetually-flopping'. His preferred method is to find material that is 'guaranteed, funny' rather than to go on stage and rely on an ability to experience flops and not know how to convert them to laughter. Park explains that Spymonkey, influenced by McCrystal, assemble their shows from a mixture of stupid ideas, some of which were initially flops or mistakes in rehearsal, and prefer to fix ideas in place:

It can always flop. But once we've done the show a while [...] everything becomes a written thing. I mean it starts off from, either something that happens by accident in a rehearsal, or, something delicious, an idea for a costume or for a visual gag, or you know, for a particular line, planned and unplanned stuff (Park 2013).

In the classroom, Gaulier can identify points where he can offer ideas, instructions, alternative strategies, and he can teach people to know when to look for alternative ideas. He can also terminate a student's failing attempt and invite a new student to try. On stage, this tactic is more dangerous, as a student continuing to improvise with the flop is left without the structure provided by the teacher, his tasks and judgement. For this company making touring shows, though they are still alert to the potential for flops, it is more reliable to craft 'written' and rehearsed mistakes. A possible clue to this process was repeated a few times by Gaulier in his 2009 course 'It's a good idea never to forget "yesterday I was funny"'. He paused, and then added, 'If you were funny' (Gaulier, cited in Amsden 2009, p. 12). This does not demand that yesterday's moment was deliberate or controlled - as we saw in the story about Gregor, the audience may be laughing at something the performer did not intend to show, or even at something provoked by the teacher. One of the few days I was funny during the 2009 summer course. I stood in my clown costume and on Gaulier's instruction I

repeatedly insisted, 'I am a serious person'. I was not able to revisit this during the course, but since the study I have continued to approach the subject of clown training with seriousness (see figure 1).

Figure 1: The author at École Philippe Gaulier 2009. Photo Courtesy of Marita Davies.

## Serious Comic Failure

Philosopher William Desmond understands comedy as the embodiment of a particular philosophical approach to failure. He begins with the assertion that death represents ultimate 'failure of being' - when we die, we fail to be. Desmond offers that:

Comedy is a kind of metaphysical commentary on finiteness and failure. We will *always* and *inevitably* fail. Sometimes we laugh with failure, some times at it, sometimes with bitterness, sometimes more gently. (1988: 302).

If humans will 'always and inevitably' fail, laughter at human failure is an energetic and alive acknowledgement of humanity, and as such transforms knowledge of ultimate failure into something that reaffirms being. According to Desmond's theory, any clown flop will summon to the spectator's mind the inevitability of failure in human existence, and counter it with the 'energy of being' to be found in laughter. This resonates with Gaulier's assertion that the audience of a clown show laughs at 'the absurdity and humanity of the numbskull' (2007, p. 280). Lecoq, too, prioritised the visible humanity in the flop, 'The clown is the person who flops, who messes up his turn [...] Through his failure he reveals his profoundly human nature, which moves us and makes us laugh' (2002: 156). Perhaps to heighten this distance between failure and laughter, the ultimate epistemological failure - death - is a regular theme or trope in clown in and beyond Gaulier's teaching. There were two clown deaths in the school's Clown Show (December, 2013). One clown was introduced to perform 'a tragedy in 60

seconds', stabbing himself with a plastic retractable knife. His serious performance of suicide flopped repeatedly, caused by his own proud smiles to the audience, and by another performer's impatient countdown of how many seconds he had remaining. The second clown death was presented as a world famous lion tamer. The clown, Fanny Duret, dragged on a metal trunk, amateurishly labelled 'LION'. She attempted to build up an atmosphere of tension, repeating the word 'danger', but it was totally apparent that there was no lion. Unable to perform her big cat act, the trainer mimed being dragged into the box and being eaten. As neither clown could ever fully represent death, comic failures to represent the un-representable do not remotely resemble serious failure, and are therefore temporary and inconsequential. The impermanence of clown death means that in these examples there is no possibility of existential failure, instead we see a flexible and impermanent flop, at which we can laugh. The terminology surrounding clown training can sound serious - in this article I have used words including stupid, idiot, failure, trouble, death, disaster, and catastrophe. Death is frequently referred to, by Gaulier, and always treated as comic and met with student laughter. Comedy and death also abut and overlap one another in performance practices and dramatic writing that shares territory with clowning. Though students and performers experience negative emotions in response to their failures, at the same time, Gaulier's feedback is delivered with humour and function as a reminder that failure is human, and that clown failures are intended to be funny.

## **Conclusion**

Flops, which can always occur in performance, are everyday occurrences of the clown workshop. A buoyant and flexible attitude to the flop allows clowning to continue and develop, and in turn allows students to discover what flops they can repeat to make audiences laugh. When learning clown, it is crucial that there is an audience - the students could not learn to use, create, or respond to flops without their audience of

peers who either do or do not laugh. Gaulier creates opportunities for flops, and draws attention to those that occur, in order that students experience the process by which a failed joke can be transformed into something that makes audiences laugh. Students experience a variety of situations where audiences are laughing, with the inferred aim that they observe how accidental flops cause laughter, gain agency over these processes, and build up a repertoire of ways in which audiences can be made to laugh deliberately.

In generating clown material, the figure of M. Marcel introduces the concept of trusting a stupid idea. For a clown in training or in performance, this type of failure is scripted, rehearsed and to some extent acted, and can be understood as dramatic, performing an apparent failure to understand social reality. However M. Flop is used to bring in sensitivity to the moment of performance, an elusive and defining skill in popular performance. This more flexible and responsive aspect of clowning is possibly more important than the stupid idea, and certainly prioritized in the workshops. Gaulier-trained performers go on to use ‘stupid ideas’, or apparent flops, to create comic dramaturgies, which work with repetitive building structures, offering regular surprises in which the clowns appear not to understand social realities or dramatic conventions. Gaulier-trained clowns have learned to be aware of and responsive to the audience response. The laugh to be gained from acknowledging that something has really gone wrong is not so reliable as laughs to be gained at things which appear to have gone wrong but are at all times under the skilful control of the clown performer. The teacher does not explicitly explain the process by which his students learn this skill of the created, apparent flop, but some students discover it during rehearsal for shows after their formal training.

Each clown student is taught to find their own stupid ideas and deal with flops in real time, in front of each different audience, and the learning is heuristic, since the

improvisatory, playful and reflexive learning process is understood to go on into performance practice and to be the responsibility of the student. By approaching failures using the playful fiction of Monsieur Flop and Monsieur Marcel, Gaulier gives further agency to his students while maintaining a playful distance. Both characters bring a level of ambiguity to the clown skills Gaulier teaches: there is misguided confidence in working with M. Marcel, whose advice is wrong but reassuring, whereas M. Flop can be a frightening figure but in fact helps the clown to achieve their goals. Gaulier's term 'the flop' is lighter, less final, less absolute than 'failure'. It has comic potential, it is onomatopoeic, has bodily connotations and it suggests movement and flexibility, the opposite of rigidity. It can be gradual or sudden. Most importantly, the clown can recover from a flop, balance on its edge, and play with it, turning it into success.

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Figure 1: The author at École Philippe Gaulier 2009. Photo Courtesy of Marita Davies.